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## Writing a love letter to your (perceived) enemy: Thích Nhất Hạnh and the rhetoric of nonviolence

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**Abstract:** Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist Thích Nhất Hạnh has been a leading figure in the promotion of nonviolent practice throughout the world. We examine his concept of engaged Buddhism, theories of nonviolence, and intersections with rhetorical and communication studies. His approach takes nonviolence beyond the realm of refusing to use physical violence to the recognition that language itself can be violent. In order to understand this approach we detail the concepts of interbeing, loving speech, and deep listening. We examine the role of love in Nhất Hạnh's theory of nonviolence, comparing it with approaches taken by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Examples are given from many of Nhất Hạnh's speeches and writings with particular attention paid to a love letter he wrote to US President George W. Bush during the Iraq War. Thích Nhất Hạnh offers the practice of writing a love letter to one's perceived enemy as a means to persuade for a turn to nonviolence.

**Keywords:** nonviolence, rhetoric, Thích Nhất Hạnh, peace, interbeing

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*L'écriture d'une lettre d'amour à votre ennemi (perçu): Thích Nhất Hạnh et la rhétorique de la non-violence*

**Résumé:** Grande maître bouddhiste vietnamien Thích Nhất Hạnh est un militant pacifiste qui occupe une place dominante dans la promotion de la non-violence à travers le monde. Nous examinons son concept de bouddhisme engagé, les théories de la non-violence et l'interaction entre l'étude de la rhétorique et l'étude de la communication. L'approche de Thích Nhất Hạnh constitue une évolution de la no-

tion de non-violence d'un simple refus de pratiquer la violence physique vers une reconnaissance de la violence verbale. Afin de comprendre cette approche, nous détaillons les préceptes de l'inter-être, la parole aimante et l'écoute profonde. Nous considérons le rôle de l'amour dans la théorie de la non-violence de Thích Nhất Hạnh et nous en faisons une comparaison avec les approches adoptées par Mahatma Gandhi et Martin Luther King, Jr. Nous illustrons également la théorie par des citations provenant des discours et écrits de Thích Nhất Hạnh, avec une attention particulière accordée à une lettre d'amour qu'il a écrite au président américain George W. Bush pendant la guerre en Irak. Thích Nhất Hạnh propose que l'acte d'écrire une lettre d'amour à quelqu'un que l'on perçoit comme un ennemi est un moyen de persuasion qui inspire la non-violence.

**Mots-clés:** non-violence, rhétorique, Thích Nhất Hạnh, paix, inter-être

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## Introduction

Most discussions of nonviolence focus on physical actions: protests, sit-ins, non-cooperation, and other practices that do not cause physical harm to others (see Galtung 1965, Martin & Varney 2003, Schock 2003, and Sharp 1973). Buddhist monk and activist Thích Nhất Hạnh's contribution to theories and practices of nonviolence extends the concept to the discursive, the cognitive, and the spiritual spheres. Relying on the concept of "interbeing" – a Buddhist concept of the interdependence of all things on one another – Nhất Hạnh explains that seeking to change the world through nonviolence should be practiced in each of these areas. The members of a movement must not only eschew weapons and other forms of physical violence, but also avoid speech that is harmful. In the sense of interbeing, when we use words of force, of coercion, we are not only committing violence against those we perceive as our adversaries, but against ourselves as well.

Nhất Hạnh is not a rhetorical theorist, but communication is at the heart of his perspective. What we present is a synthetic rhetorical theory of nonviolence that arises through his speeches, books, and other writings. In the following sections we will briefly introduce Nhất Hạnh, discuss several of his key ideas about communication including interbeing, non-attachment to views, and the role of love. Next we connect his theory to relevant scholarship about nonviolence in rhetorical and communication studies. We conclude with an analysis of a love letter sent by Nhất Hạnh to President George W. Bush in response to the Iraq War.

## 1. Thích Nhất Hạnh's life and ideas

Born in Vietnam in 1926, Thích Nhất Hạnh witnessed firsthand the death and destruction brought on by war. Much of the 20th Century in Vietnam was marked by internal conflict and struggles against foreign occupations. Nhất Hạnh entered a Buddhist monastery at 16 and was fully ordained in 1949, at the age of 23. Nhất

Hạnh quickly emerged as a leader, scholar, and independent thinker within the Vietnamese Buddhist establishment.

In 1954, the French lost Vietnam to nationalist forces and the Geneva Accords divided the country into North and South. During this time of great internal upheaval, Nhất Hạnh struggled with how, as an emerging monastic, he should respond to the division and devastation around him. He coined the term “engaged Buddhism” to describe his integration of contemplative life and social action (Ratner, 2016, p. 34). Nhất Hạnh describes how his approach to activism was born out of his personal experience of violence:

When I was in Vietnam, so many of our villages were being bombed. Along with my monastic brothers and sisters, I had to decide what to do. Should we continue to practice in our monasteries, or should we leave the meditation halls in order to help the people who were suffering under the bombs? After careful reflection, we decided to do both—to go out and help people and to do so in mindfulness. We called it engaged Buddhism. Mindfulness must be engaged. Once there is seeing, there must be acting. ... We must be aware of the real problems of the world. Then, with mindfulness, we will know what to do and what not to do to be of help. (1991, p. 91)

Buddhism, which had traditionally been more focused on inner transformation, did not have a clear tradition of social activism. Nhất Hạnh collaborated with like-minded peers in Vietnam as he continued to develop both a theory and practice of a nonviolent, engaged approach to Buddhism.

In the early 1960s, Nhất Hạnh came to the United States for two years, where he lectured on Buddhism at Cornell and Columbia Universities (Nhất Hạnh, 1991; 1999). As the United States’ involvement in the conflict in Vietnam escalated, he returned to North America in 1966 to speak out against the war. He took this opportunity to meet with and exchange ideas about nonviolence with important Western spiritual figures, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Merton, and Daniel Berrigan (King, 2003). As a result of Nhất Hạnh’s advocacy, both North and South Vietnam considered him a threat and denied him the right to return to Vietnam, beginning a 39 year exile. In 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. nominated Nhất Hạnh for the Nobel Peace Prize, saying: “Here is an apostle of peace and non-violence. ... His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity” (1967). The Nobel Peace Prize, however, was not awarded to anybody that year.

From his adopted home base in France, Nhất Hạnh has continued to advocate for peace and social justice, while being a pioneer introducing many Westerners to Buddhism. In addition to founding six monasteries and dozens of practice centers in America and Europe, Thích Nhất Hạnh has published over 100 books on meditation, mindfulness, and engaged Buddhism. Through these works he has presented his

ideas on the concepts of interbeing, non-attachment to views, loving speech, deep listening, and the primacy of love that we will discuss in the next sections.

### 1.1. *Interbeing*

In order to understand Thích Nhất Hạnh's approach to nonviolence, it is essential to first explore his belief in the concept of interbeing. In Buddhist doctrine, this principle is traditionally called dependent origination or dependent co-arising. It refers to the idea that everything in the universe is interconnected through a complex web of cause and effect. Thích Nhất Hạnh describes this principle of interconnectedness through the exploration of the origins of a piece of paper:

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. We can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are. "Interbeing" is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix "inter-" with the verb "to be," we have a new verb, "inter-be"...Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also, so we can say that everything is in here in this sheet of paper. (1987, p. 53)

Another way of saying this is that "we are a part of everything, and everything is part of us" (Nhất Hạnh, 1991, p. 103). Looking at things from this perspective, it becomes apparent that Nhất Hạnh believes that we are not really completely separate from our enemies. He believes that "we belong to each other; we cannot cut reality into pieces. The well-being of 'this' is the well-being of 'that,' so we have to do things together. Every side is 'our side'; there is no evil side" (Nhất Hạnh, 1991, p. 103). Polinska (2007) reports that this concept of interbeing is at the center of Nhất Hạnh's ideas about nonviolence. She observes that Nhất Hạnh's "Buddhist teachings focus on how our interdependence with others makes partisan conflict unintelligible. Our interbeing with others implies that whether we are so called 'oppressors' or 'the oppressed,' we all contribute to injustice and violence in the world" (Polinska, 2007, p. 93). So one can see how Nhất Hạnh's concept of "loving your enemy" comes from a perspective in which he sees himself as intrinsically connected to any person or group of people that could be conceptualized as an "enemy." Even the very idea of an "enemy" does not fit into this worldview, in which everyone is connected to one another.

### 1.2. *Non-attachment to views*

Another essential Buddhist principle that informs Nhất Hạnh's ideas about nonviolence is "non-attachment to views" (2008, p. 8). Nhất Hạnh emphasizes the centrality of this tenant to his thinking, not just about social activism, but about the world itself: "The basic spirit of Buddhism is non-attachment to views." He even

warns against attachment to Buddhist principles themselves: “If you are attached to these teachings, you are lost” (Nhất Hạnh, 2008, p. 8). Nhất Hạnh is particularly concerned about the relationship between inflexible opinions and violence. He warns that “War is the outcome of attachment to views, of fanaticism...Peace cannot exist if we maintain our fanaticism concerning our views” (Nhất Hạnh, 2008, p. 8). The commitment to non-attachment to views is so essential to Nhất Hạnh, that this principle informed the first three of The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, the foundational precepts of the Order of Interbeing that he established in Saigon in 1964 (Nhất Hạnh, 1997a). “The Order of Interbeing was born as a spiritual resistance movement. It is based completely on the teachings of the Buddha. The First Mindfulness Training—non-attachment to views, freedom from all ideologies—was a direct answer to the war. Everyone was ready to die and to kill for their beliefs” (Nhất Hạnh, 2008, p. 8).

In the Third of the Mindfulness Trainings, the commitment to non-attachment to views leads to a discussion of love and compassion:

We are committed to respecting the right of others to be different, to choose what to believe and how to decide. We will, however, learn to help others let go of and transform fanaticism and narrowness through loving speech and compassionate dialogue” (Nhất Hạnh, 2007, p. 104).

The Eighth and Ninth Mindfulness Trainings bring our attention to deep listening and truthful and loving speech that further develops his focus on communication as central to engaged Buddhism. Nhất Hạnh’s particular approach to nonviolence is encapsulated in The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, which advocate approaching all people—including opponents—from a perspective of interconnection, openness, and ultimately love.

### 1.3. *What does “love” mean?*

At this point it is important to clarify what Thích Nhất Hạnh and others are referring to when they talk about love, because this word can trigger numerous associations. Frequently we think of romantic desire or familial affection when we hear the word “love;” for Nhất Hạnh “love” has a different connotation. In his book *Teachings on Love*, Nhất Hạnh discusses the Sanskrit word “maitri,” which “can be translated as ‘love’ or ‘loving kindness’ :

Some Buddhist teachers prefer “loving kindness,” as they find the word “love” too dangerous. But I prefer the word “love.” Words sometimes get sick and we have to heal them. We have been using the word “love” to mean appetite or desire, as in “I love hamburgers.” We have to use language more carefully. “Love” is a beautiful word; we have to restore its meaning. The word “maitri” has roots in the word mitra which means friend. In Buddhism, the primary meaning of love is friendship. (1997b, p. 2)

The primacy of love as a feature of nonviolence is also found in the words of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Terchek (2001) observes that “Gandhi wants to weave the threads of love everywhere and extend them to everyone, including our enemies” and views “Gandhian love” as founded on an “openness that enables a person to find a unity and mutuality with others.” Gandhi equated love with nonviolence itself: “Nonviolence, in its active form, is goodwill toward all life. It is pure love” (1996, p. 41). For Gandhi then, love is not only an interpersonal emotion, that is, a feeling that exists between two people. Neither is love something soft or sentimental. Key to Gandhi’s concept of nonviolence is his belief in love as perhaps one of the most powerful forces for social change: “Power is of two kinds. One is obtained by the fear of punishment and the other by acts of love. Power based on love is a thousand times more effective and permanent than the one derived from fear of punishment” (Gandhi, 1925, p. 15).

It was after reading Gandhi that King first came to see “love” as applying to more than just individuals, but as being a powerful force for change (1956, p. 97). When King appealed to his followers to “love your enemy,” he used the Greek term *agape* to describe the “love” that he referred to. “*Agape* means understanding, redeeming good will for all men,” explained King. He went on to describe it as a “love seeking to create and preserve community” (King & Washington, 1986, p. 19). For King, the principle of nonviolence is intrinsically linked to his ideas of “love”:

At the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love. The nonviolent resister would contend that in the struggle for human dignity, the oppressed people of the world must not succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter or indulging in hate campaigns. To retaliate in kind would do nothing but intensify the existence of hate in the universe. Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate. This can only be done by projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives. (King & Washington, 1986, p. 19)

Just as “understanding” is the first word King used to define *agape*, it is also at the center of Nhất Hạnh’s idea of love: “Understanding and love are not two things, but just one” (Nhất Hạnh, 1987, p. 14). For Nhất Hạnh, looking deeply into the wants, needs, and suffering of another is essential for achieving both love and peace. Agreeing with King and Gandhi, Nhất Hạnh believes that “Love is the essence of nonviolence” (1993, p. 39). He goes on to say that that “love” is essential to both the principled and pragmatic goals of nonviolence: “Out of love and the willingness to act selflessly, strategies, tactics, and techniques for a nonviolent struggle arise naturally” (Nhất Hạnh, 1993, p. 39). Nhất Hạnh’s view is not universally shared. In the next section we will discuss differing conceptions of nonviolence and review the ways that rhetorical and communication studies, and to a more limited extent political science and peace studies, have treated the subject.

## 2. Concepts of nonviolence

It is common in the academic literature to define a split between pragmatic and principled nonviolence (see Martin & Varney 2003, Schock 2003, and Sharp 1973). Those taking the pragmatic approach view nonviolence primarily through the lens of action, including peaceful protest, sit-ins, and boycotts, without the necessity for a corresponding set of beliefs in the fundamental values of nonviolence. According to Schock, “nonviolent action is *active*—it involves activity in the collective pursuit of social or political objectives—and it is *non-violent*—it does not involve physical force or the threat of physical force against human beings” (2003, p. 705). This strategic approach focuses on nonviolent action as a purely tactical tool, even a weapon, which can be used to fight oppressive regimes.

Another important perspective on nonviolence is that the motives and beliefs of those employing nonviolence are essential elements in its practice. Principled nonviolence, exemplified by Gandhi, King, and Nhất Hạnh, “seeks to love potential enemies rather than destroy them and promotes nonviolent peaceful means to peaceful ends. Its preferred processes are persuasion, cooperation and nonviolent resistance to forceful coercion for political purposes” (Clements, 2015, p. 12). Alternatively, Gene Sharp, a leading proponent of pragmatic nonviolence, argues that:

the use of the term “nonviolence” is especially unfortunate, because it confuses these forms of mass action with beliefs in ethical or religious nonviolence (“principled nonviolence”). Those beliefs, which have their merits, are different phenomena that usually are unrelated to mass struggles conducted by people who do not share such beliefs. (2005b, p. 9)

The principled nonviolence approach finds support from religious figures, but is not sectarian in its practice. That the three leaders in nonviolent movements come from Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist perspectives demonstrates that their perspective transcends exclusionary religious beliefs. Whether pragmatic or principled, nonviolence aims to create change by making visible that the institutional power’s perceived legitimacy is based on force and not on moral authority or public agreement. This is principally a communication activity.

### 3.1. *Rhetoric and Nonviolence*

Nonviolent rhetoric engages the world and seeks to change it by speaking with and listening to “the other”. Gorsevski finds in a review of rhetorical studies of nonviolence that “it remains a marginalized area of research, tending to represent the rhetorics of specific interest groups such as women or minorities, rather than cases of rhetoric of general interest to a wider array of students and scholars” (2012, p. 10).

Given the seeming affinity between rhetoric and nonviolence, it is surprising that there has not been more scholarship on the subjects. Gorsevski (2012) offers an analysis of the intersections between theories of nonviolence and rhetoric. She argues “Nonviolent theory shows rhetoricians that language and culture, in a sense



our way of creating and perpetuating our reality, can be devoid of, or impose minimal, aggression” (Gorsevski, 2012, p. xxiv). Nonviolent actions are almost always communicative and rhetorical. Speaking, listening, writing, occupying a space, marching, and noncooperation are all rhetorical moves. The people employing them do so to communicate an idea to their supporters, their (perceived) opponents, and the media.

Herrick (2013) explains that “rhetorical discourse typically is a response either to a situation or to a previous rhetorical statement” (p. 11). Nhất Hạnh’s concept of compassionate communication and deep listening merges clearly with Herrick’s terminology of rhetoric as “response-making” and “response-inviting” (Herrick, 2013, p. 11). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s New Rhetoric Project tried to theorize a way in which people could argue to gain the adherence of others without resorting to force. They wrote that “recourse to argumentation assumes the establishment of a community of minds, which while it lasts, excludes the use of violence” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 55). They did not frame their task explicitly as nonviolent rhetoric, but there are clear connections.

Very few works in communication and rhetorical studies have looked at Nhất Hạnh. Uçok-Sayrak (2014) compared the ethics of communication in the works of Levinas and Nhất Hạnh finding that in both “frameworks, the ethical response to the Other requires a kind of receptivity beyond the boundaries of rational-discursive thinking and the conventional ‘I’” (p. 262). There have not been studies in rhetoric and communication that directly examine Nhất Hạnh’s ideas about nonviolent communication. We seek to show how Nhất Hạnh’s engaged Buddhism can be read as a rhetorical theory of nonviolence.

Nonviolent methods can take many forms, most of which are clearly communicative. Sharp (1973) categorizes them as protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and intervention. Though he explicitly includes persuasion in the first group, actions in each of three categories are rhetorical. Certainly protest and persuasion, including speeches, music, and picketing are designed to communicate and persuade. In the second category, noncooperation, actions such as strikes and boycotts serve not only to disrupt normal social and economic activities, but to persuade the public that the values of the nonviolent movement are worthy of attention and superior to those of the opposition. The third category, intervention, includes the actions of sit-ins, hunger strikes, and seeking imprisonment. Again, these actions have their principal force as communication events. The pain and possible death of the protestor has no material effect on institutional power. The force of the action is communicative. Martin and Varney (2003) note that nonviolent action “creates meanings among observers, though explanations help to crystallize the purposes of the actions or, semiotically speaking, select out denotations from a range of connotations” (p. 215). These actions garner attention for the movement, demonstrate commitment and credibility, and engage the audience in a reconsideration of the values of those engaged in the movement and institutional power.

We often think of persuasion as opponents who try to change the mind of the other. Success is measured by the change of belief. But this rarely happens in practice. How often do we really change our minds about something, particularly something we strongly believe? Nhất Hạnh is not the only one to think about alternatives to narrow theories of persuasion. Two theories that have attempted this are Gilbert's coalescent argumentation and Foss and Griffin's invitational rhetoric.

One approach that seeks to move beyond traditional theories of persuasion is Gilbert's coalescent argumentation. He describes it as

a normative ideal that involves the joining together of two disparate claims through recognition and exploration of opposing positions. By uncovering the crucial connection between a claim and the attitudes, beliefs, feelings, values, and needs to which it is connected dispute partners are able to identify points of agreement and disagreement. These points can then be utilized to effect coalescence, a joining or merging of divergent positions, by forming the basis for a mutual investigation of non-conflictual options that might otherwise have remained unconsidered. (Gilbert, 1995, p. 837)

Rather than attitude change, argumentation often leads to outcomes that "include a negotiated agreement, a compromise, or a realization that further dispute is futile" (Gilbert, 1995, p. 837). This determination requires listening between dispute partners and a willingness to speak what they believe deeply. The ability to both listen and speak in this way is reflected in Nhất Hạnh's ideas of loving speech and deep listening. This approach is challenging given how complex beliefs are.

The first step of coalescent argumentation is asking the question "why are we arguing?" (Gilbert, 1995, p. 841). "If I do not know what you want, what you believe, what you feel, then it is difficult, to say the least, for me to satisfy or shift those needs through argumentation" (Gilbert, 1995, p. 842). Persuasion is often thought of as taking something (e.g., an arguer takes a point or position away from the other). Gilbert argues that "most analytical tools focus on the desire of the respondent to eliminate, defeat or otherwise invalidate the proponent's reasons. While this can be important in certain circumstances, it should not be the major goal of a respondent, and certainly not at the outset of a dispute" (Gilbert, 1995, p. 842). Nhất Hạnh and coalescent argumentation can be read as viewing argumentation as an opportunity to give things to one another. Those gifts may be a change in attitude, the space to reconsider beliefs, or even just the chance to be heard.

Gilbert writes that a claim is like the tip of an iceberg for a much larger, more deeply held position: "To effect persuasion one must impact on the entire position and not just the claim...[The position] is a matrix of beliefs, attitudes, emotions, insights, and values connected to a claim" (1995, pp. 839-840). A critical part of Gilbert's theory is the recognition that arguers do not always have self-awareness of the depths of their positions. In the way that a person who is tortured may say something they do not believe in order to stop the physical violence, arguers may make claims that they do not believe or are fearful to question if there is a threat of

physical or communicative violence. Nhất Hạnh's approach calls on practitioners to engage their own complicated feelings and to listen to those of others.

While most Western rhetorical theorists have thought of rhetoric and persuasion as synonymous, Foss and Griffin (1995), offer an invitational rhetoric that challenges that assumption. It is a rhetoric that is "rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination" (p. 5). Nhất Hạnh might say that the invitation stems from an understanding of interbeing. Foss and Griffin highlight other features that would be familiar to Nhất Hạnh including, non-judgement, appreciation, listening, and nonadversarial positioning. Such an approach emphasizes a context in which participants are not opponents and persuasion is not coercion. In relation to nonviolent rhetoric, Gorsevski (2012) states that "persuasion is not necessarily violent (or even coercive) when it is performed in the context of true nonviolent action. True nonviolent action means action that is aimed at resisting oppression, either purposefully or unwittingly" (p. 186).

The idea that participants in argumentation are willing to change is both necessary and challenging. Nhất Hạnh (1995) writes:

We have to appreciate that truth can be received from outside of—not only within—our own group. If we do not believe that, entering into dialogue would be a waste of time. If we think we monopolize the truth and we still organize a dialogue, it is not authentic. We have to believe that by engaging in dialogue with the other person, we have the possibility of making a change within ourselves, that we can become deeper. Dialogue is not a means for assimilation in the sense that one side expands and incorporates the other into its "self." Dialogue must be practiced on the basis of "non-self." We have to allow what is good, beautiful, and meaningful in the other's tradition to transform us. (p. 9)

If we do not believe that we ourselves are capable of changing our beliefs as a result of dialogue and persuasion, then why should we believe that others have this ability or desire? If we think that the "other side" is persuadable (not just that they should be persuadable) is it only because we think that their belief is a weak one, that they do not really believe their stated position, or that they are willing to let go of their belief in exchange for something of greater value? In order to have a dialogue in which one's opponent is open to persuasion, we must also be open to such persuasion. The ability to persuade, or be persuaded, requires some realization of non-attachment to views.

The persuasive function of nonviolence engages several audiences. In a nonviolent action, there is the immediate audience, usually institutional powers or their representatives. A consequence of nonviolent action may be a violent response, and to suffer violence is, itself, a communicative act of nonviolence. In Gandhi's view "Suffering is infinitely more powerful than the law of the jungle for converting the opponent and opening his ear, which are otherwise shut, to the voice of reason" (as cited in Southern Christian Leadership Conference, p. 2). As a matter of persuasion,

it may be very difficult to find immediate attitude change. But the audience that may be more open to change is that which views the action from afar. This mediated experience is the goal of much of nonviolent action. In Gandhi's protest on the Dharasana Salt Works in 1930, the greatest change in beliefs about the movement came from those with a mediated experience of the action, particularly an international audience who read about the protests in their newspapers (Martin & Varney, 2003, p. 215).

If we transfer Nhất Hạnh's concepts of interbeing and engaged Buddhism to rhetoric's concern with audience, we are left in an interesting place. In traditional Buddhism, the self is often seen as the primary rhetorical audience. In Nhất Hạnh's rhetorical nonviolence, the self and the other are simultaneous audiences. In rhetorical studies we are used to talking about multiple audiences for discourse. For Nhất Hạnh, all beings, in fact all creation, is part of the audience for every speech. This includes the speaker as an audience as well. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) wrote that it "very often happens that discussion with someone else is simply a means we use to see things more clearly ourselves" (p. 41). When we move past the idea of self versus enemy, rhetoric addressed outwardly also has a persuasive effect inwardly. To use violent language when speaking to, or about, the perceived enemy is to perpetuate violence against oneself. This does not, however, take away from persuasion as the main tool of nonviolence.

### 3. Why nothing less than love?

Even for many who accept a nonviolent approach to conflict resolution, the idea of "loving your enemy" can be a difficult concept to embrace. One might think, "Just because I don't like violence, doesn't mean I'm ready to love my enemy." Sharp directly questions the need for a nonviolent ethic that is based in moral ideals like "loving your enemy." He states that,

when understood as a requirement for nonviolent action (rather than a helpful refinement), the demand for "love" for people who have done cruel things may turn people who are justifiably bitter and unable to love their opponents toward violence as the technique most consistent with bitterness and hatred. (Sharp, 2005a, p. 635)

In response to Sharp's casting of "love" as an unnecessary "refinement" of nonviolent social movements, critics have explored the limitation of a solely strategic or pragmatic approach to nonviolence to achieve the lasting goals of peace and social justice (Bharadwaj, 1998; Clements, 2015; Braatz, 2014). They point to recent instances in which pragmatic nonviolence was effective at bringing about regime change, but ultimately failed to provide citizens with basic assurances of safety or equality, including the Philippines and Egypt. Braatz (2014) observes that even "a successful civilian resistance movement, one that removes an unpopular repressive regime, is no guarantee of democratic inclusion, social justice, equality of opportuni-

ty, and human rights protections” (p. 5). Braatz goes on to argue that “if the goal is to reduce violence of all types ... [then] the principled approach—identifying and rejecting any and all forms of violence—is also the pragmatic one” (2014, p. 11).

The strategic approach to nonviolence is very different from what Nhất Hạnh and others who prioritize the pursuit of peace and understanding among people articulate. They are not focused on just short term goals of policy or regime change. Gandhi suggested that without love, you cannot really have nonviolence. He said:

We can only win over the opponent by love, never by hate. Hate is the subtlest form of violence. We cannot be really non-violent and yet have hate in us ... Violent non-co-operation only multiplies evil. ... As evil can only be sustained by violence, withdrawal of support of evil requires complete abstention from violence. (Gandhi, 1971, p. 96)

Martin Luther King, Jr. also spoke unequivocally about his commitment to “love our enemies.” King explains that “We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up” (2012, p. 50-51). Both King and Gandhi are looking beyond just removing current sources of oppression, to how to build communities that make it hard for oppression to take hold.

In highlighting the diverse spiritual origins of the concept of “loving your enemy,” Thích Nhất Hạnh (1995) acknowledges its apparent contradiction: “When Gandhi said that love is the force that can liberate, he meant we have to love our enemy. Even if our enemy is cruel, even if he is crushing us, sowing terror and injustice, we have to love him. This is the message of Jesus” (p. 84). He says that gaining knowledge and understanding is the key to this challenge: “Understanding a person brings us the power to love and accept him. And the moment we love and accept him, he ceases to be our enemy. To ‘love our enemy’ is impossible, because the moment we love him, he is no longer our enemy” (Nhất Hạnh, 1995, p. 85). For Nhất Hạnh, communication and love are necessary partners in nonviolent practice. This is a different approach from many rhetorical and nonviolence theorists, but there are bridges when we consider the rhetorical value of understanding one’s audience.

#### **4. How can you start to love your enemy?**

Nhất Hạnh also recognizes that it is not obvious to most of us how to cultivate a peaceful presence: “Everyone knows that peace has to begin with oneself, but not many people know how to do it” (as cited in Malkin, 2003). He often uses the image of seeds in ground to illustrate the tendencies that are in each of us. He says that we have both the seeds of love, compassion, and understanding; as well as the seeds of fear, anger and intolerance. According to Nhất Hạnh (2003), “when we know how

to cultivate the seeds of love, compassion, and understanding in us every day, those seeds become stronger and the seeds of violence and hatred will become weaker and weaker” (p. 2).

In his books and lectures, Nhất Hạnh outlines practical steps—including breathing and meditation—that people can take to help transform the seeds of violence. Even as he encourages the cultivation of internal peace, Nhất Hạnh (2003) urges people to actively practice cultivating love and understanding in our interactions with others: “There are concrete ways to train ourselves to communicate non-violently so that compassion for one another is awakened and mutual understanding becomes possible again. Speaking and listening with compassion are the essential practices of nonviolent communication” (p. 21). His idea of engaged mindfulness involves engaging in practices that build peace both inside oneself and in the world.

One such practice is writing love letters, both to loved ones and to political leaders. Nhất Hạnh (1991) refers to letter writing as not just a powerful act of loving speech, but also “a practice of looking deeply” (p. 110). Nhất Hạnh was concerned by his observation of anger and aggression in the American peace movement noting that “People in the peace movement can write very good protest letters, but they are not so skilled at writing love letters” (1991, p. 110). Nhất Hạnh hopes that they could use practices, like writing love letters, to give them a “fresh way of being peace” (1991, p. 110). The letter writing that he encourages is an embodiment of his rhetorical nonviolent approach.

### 5. Thích Nhất Hạnh’s Love Letter to President Bush

As a Buddhist and peace activist, Nhất Hạnh opposes all armed conflict. During the early 2000s, he advocated for the United States to withdraw from the conflict in Iraq. In 2006, he wrote a letter to President George W. Bush about his feelings about the war.<sup>1</sup> There are several features of the letter that should be examined. First, the

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<sup>1</sup> This is the letter Nhất Hạnh wrote to George W. Bush. He sent a handwritten letter to the White House and released a copy to the public.

Dear Mr. President,

Last night, I saw my brother (who died two weeks ago in the USA) coming back to me in a dream. He was with all his children. He told me, “Let’s go home together.” After a millisecond of hesitation, I told him joyfully, “Ok, let’s go.”

Waking up from that dream at 5 am this morning, I thought of the situation in the Middle East; and for the first time, I was able to cry. I cried for a long time, and I felt much better after about one hour. Then I went to the kitchen and made some tea. While making tea, I realized that what my brother had said is true: our home is large enough for all of us. Let us go home as brothers and sisters.

Mr. President, I think that if you could allow yourself to cry like I did this morning, you will also feel much better. It is our brothers that we kill over there. They are our brothers, God tells us so, and we also know it. They may not see us as brothers because of their anger, their misunderstanding, and their discrimination. But with some awakening, we can see things in a different way, and this will allow us to respond differently to the situation. I trust God in you; I trust Buddha nature in you.

Thank you for reading.

In gratitude and with brotherhood,

form of the letter is important. Nhất Hạnh wrote it by hand. The format of the communication may contribute to its reception. We write and receive fewer pieces of handwritten mail today. Noam (2005) remarks that the flood of electronic messages may reduce their persuasiveness and that in that environment “the most effective means of communications to an elected official—other than a campaign contribution check—becomes the handwritten letter”. We do not know if President Bush received the letter or was persuaded by it because he did not offer any response. But Bush was not the only audience for the letter. Nhất Hạnh released the letter publically and posted it on his website. This allows anyone who can access it the opportunity to be persuaded by Nhất Hạnh’s words.

Nhất Hạnh begins this letter with an intensely personal memory. In this introduction, he is clearly trying to approach Bush as another human, not as a leader or policy maker. Nhất Hạnh (1991) has written of the importance of attempting to engage one’s intended audience. He encourages activists to write letters to leaders “that they will want to read, and not just throw away” (p. 110). To this end, he writes that “the kind of language we use should not turn people off. The President is a person like any of us” (Nhất Hạnh, 1991, p. 110). In recounting his dream of his recently deceased brother, Nhất Hạnh is acknowledging the very human nature of both himself and George W. Bush.

Also in this anecdote, Nhất Hạnh is recounting a moment of joy. This may be an unexpected emotion in the context of both Nhất Hạnh’s personal loss and the conflict in the Middle East that he addresses. This reference to his own joyfulness makes sense in the context of his belief that “To suffer is not enough” (Nhất Hạnh, 1987, p. 3). In pursuing an end to war, injustice, and even personal suffering, Nhất Hạnh emphasizes the importance of stopping in order “to be in touch with the wonders of life” (1987, p. 3). He believes that cultivating the “seeds” of peace and joy within oneself is important to being able to bring peace and joy to the world.

When Nhất Hạnh mentions that he “was able to cry,” he is modeling his own ability to acknowledge and take care of his own feelings. He warns that “when we hold back our feelings and ignore our pain, we are committing violence against ourselves,” (Nhất Hạnh, 2003, p. 16). The importance of being aware of, and nurturing, our own suffering is frequently reiterated by Nhất Hạnh as an essential step towards peace. He writes, “The practice of nonviolence is to be here, to be present, and to recognize our own pain or despair” (Nhất Hạnh, 2003, p. 16). He suggests that to “recognize, embrace, and transform” difficult feelings can help us from harming ourselves or others (2003, p. 17). Gilbert’s idea of a claim being the tip of an iceberg resonates here. Nhất Hạnh is sharing with Bush his matrix of beliefs and values that support his opposition to war. That sharing may lead to more effective persuasion that engages the communicative partner.

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Thích Nhất Hạnh Plum Village (Nhất Hạnh, 2006)

An image of letter is available at <http://plumvillage.org/letters-from-thay/letter-to-president-g-w-bush-august-8-2006/>.

When Nhất Hạnh (2003) states that “our home is large enough for all of us,” and extends an invitation to “go home as brothers and sisters,” (p. 62) he is referring to the concept of interbeing discussed earlier. Nhất Hạnh believes that once individuals realize their “interconnectedness with others,” they will begin to see how their actions affect themselves and “all other life” (2003, p. 62). In the letter’s following paragraph, Nhất Hạnh, continues in this vein by saying that “It is our brothers and sisters that we kill over there” (2003, p. 62). While he draws attention to death and destruction caused by the war, Nhất Hạnh avoids blaming Bush alone, by using the words “we kill.” By communicating in this way, Nhất Hạnh illustrates that, in accord with his belief in interbeing, that he also considers himself part of the cause of this suffering.

Nhất Hạnh, conscious of the background and beliefs of his direct audience, appeals to Bush as a Christian when he writes that “God tell us so.” In the forward to *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, David Steindl-Rast (1995), a Catholic Benedictine monk, writes that “From the biblical perspective there is no human being who is not alive with God’s own breath” (p. xiv). In his writing and talking about the intersection of Buddhist and Christian beliefs, Nhất Hạnh offers this relationship of God to all beings as a way for Christians generally, and Bush specifically, to understand interbeing. He also, however, acknowledges the challenge of seeing people as “brothers” when you are in conflict with them. In writing about “their anger, their misunderstanding, and their discrimination,” Nhất Hạnh is addressing the issue of understanding. He is modeling for Bush the practice of looking deeply, trying to understand the suffering that leads to violence.

Nhất Hạnh concludes his letter on a hopeful note. He clearly believes that transformation is possible, and that seeing “things in a different way” can lead to responding “differently to the situation.” While Nhất Hạnh is deeply opposed to Bush’s actions in Iraq and the Middle East, this practice gave him an opportunity to practicing his own deep looking and loving speech. In this letter, Nhất Hạnh is both loving his “enemy” and modeling for Bush how one can “love your enemy.”

## Conclusion

Nonviolence, when viewed simply as a strategy to stop or avoid an immediate conflict, can be successful for a time. Thích Nhất Hạnh shows us that nonviolent rhetoric and nonviolent living as a continuing practice are necessary if we are to create a world of peace. To this end, we have outlined what a rhetorical theory of nonviolence looks like from the writings of Nhất Hạnh. His approach asks the non-violent speaker to be concerned with audience, argument, and style. In the sense of interbeing, audiences are composed of the speaker, all who encounter their discourse and in a fundamental way, the whole universe; to harm one is to harm all. When making arguments, we should examine why we hold the positions we do and articulate them truthfully, but be open to change. Non-attachment to views is central to both engaged Buddhism and persuasion. In terms of style, we must be mindful that



language can be violent. Speakers should not just avoid making threats, but approach themselves and their perceived enemy with love. Nhất Hạnh does not offer this as a prescriptive rhetorical theory. Rather these are ideas designed to guide people to speak and listen in way that increases love, decreases violence, and creates the possibility for true peace.

If those of us who study rhetoric and communication believe that we can change the world through language and that those efforts are preferable to violence, we should devote more of our scholarly attention to nonviolence. Using violent rhetoric and hating our perceived enemies while advocating for peace is still participating in the culture of war. In many places, nonviolence is the only form of protest accepted by most citizens and political institutions. Its effectiveness can be enhanced through engagement with Nhất Hạnh's approach of nonviolent communication. The success or failure of nonviolence is not measured in one conflict, one movement, or one time. We return to the ideas of the leaders of principled nonviolence because they have applicability in all contexts, not simply in response to one instance of violence or oppression. It is an ongoing practice that has the potential to save the world.

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